

Other Worlds (feat. stories by Rick Riordan, Shaun Tan, Tom...



PERCY JACKSON AND THE SINGER OF APOLLO

BY RICK RIORDAN

I know what you're going to ask.

"Percy Jackson, why are you hanging from a Times Square billboard without your pants on, about to fall to your death?"

Good question. You can blame Apollo, god of music, archery, and poetry—also the god of making me do stupid quests.

This particular disaster started when I

brought my friend Grover some aluminum cans for his birthday.

Perhaps I should mention ... I'm a demigod. My dad, Poseidon, is the lord of the sea, which sounds cool, I guess, but mostly it means my life is filled with monster attacks and annoying Greek gods who tend to pop up on the subway or in the middle of math class or when I'm taking a shower. (Long story. Don't ask.)

I figured maybe I'd get a day off from the craziness for Grover's birthday, but of course I was wrong.

Grover and his girlfriend, Juniper, were spending the day in Prospect Park in Brooklyn, doing naturey stuff like dancing with the local tree nymphs and serenading the squirrels. Grover's a satyr. That's his idea of fun.

Juniper seemed to be having an especially good time. While Grover and I sat on the bench together, she frolicked across Long Meadow with the other nature spirits, her chlorophyll-tinted eyes glinting in the sunlight. Since she

was a dryad, Juniper's life source was tied to a juniper bush back on Long Island, but Grover explained that she could take short trips away from home as long as she kept a handful of fresh juniper berries in her pockets. I didn't want to ask what would happen if the berries got accidentally smashed.

Anyway, we hung out for a while, talking and enjoying the nice weather. I gave Grover his aluminum cans, which may sound like a lame gift, but that's his favorite snack.

He happily munched on the cans while the nymphs started discussing what party games we should play. Grover pulled a blindfold out of his pocket and suggested Pin the Tail on the Human, which made me kind of nervous since I was the only human.

Then, without warning, the sunlight brightened. The air turned uncomfortably hot. Twenty feet away, the grass hissed and a cloud of steam whooshed up like somebody opened a big pressing machine at a Laundromat. The steam cleared, and standing in front of us was

the god Apollo.

Gods can look like anything they want, but Apollo always seemed to go for that I-just-auditioned-for-a-boy-band look. Today he was rocking pencil-thin jeans, a white muscle shirt, and gilded Ray-Ban sunglasses. His wavy blond hair glistened with product. When he smiled the dryads squealed and giggled.

"Oh, no ..." Grover murmured. "This can't be good."

"Percy Jackson!" Apollo beamed at me. "And, um, your goat friend—"

"His name is Grover," I said. "And we're kind of off duty, Lord Apollo. It's Grover's birthday."

"Happy birthday!" Apollo said. "I'm so glad you're taking the day off. That means you two have time to help me with a small problem!"

Naturally, the problem wasn't small.

Apollo led Grover and me away from the party so we could talk in private. Juniper didn't want to let Grover go, but she couldn't argue with a god. Grover promised to come back safe-

ly. I hoped it was a promise he'd be able to keep.

When we got to the edge of the woods, Apollo faced us. "Allow me to introduce the chryseae celedones."

The god snapped his fingers. More steam erupted from the ground and three golden women appeared in front of us. When I say golden, I mean they were literally gold. Their metallic skin glittered. Their sleeveless gowns were made from enough gilded fabric to finance a bailout. Their golden hair was braided and piled on top of their heads in a sort of classical beehive hairdo. They were uniformly beautiful, and uniformly terrifying.

I'd seen living statues—automatons—many times before. Beautiful or not, they almost always tried to kill me.

"Uh ..." I took a step back. "What did you say these were? Krissy Kelly something?"

"Chryseae celedones," Apollo said. "Golden singers. They're my backup band!"

I glanced at Grover, wondering if this was some kind of joke.

Grover wasn't laughing. His mouth hung open in amazement, as if the golden ladies were the largest, tastiest aluminum cans he'd ever seen. "I—I didn't think they were real!"

Apollo smiled. "Well, it's been a few centuries since I brought them out. If they perform too often, you know, their novelty wears off. They used to live at my temple in Delphi. Man, they could rock that place. Now I only use them for special occasions."

Grover got teary-eyed. "You brought them out for my birthday?"

Apollo laughed. "No, fool! I've got a concert tonight on Mount Olympus. Everyone is going to be there! The Nine Muses are opening, and I'm performing a mix of old favorites and new material. I mean, it's not like I need the cele-dones. My solo career has been great. But people will expect to hear some of my classic hits with the girls: 'Daphne on My Mind,' 'Stairway to Olympus,' 'Sweet Home Atlantis.' It's going to be awesome!"

I tried not to look nauseous. I'd heard Apol-

lo's poetry before, and if his music was even half that bad, this concert was going to blow harder than Aeolus the wind god.

"Great," I said half-heartedly. "So what's the problem?"

Apollo's smile faded. "Listen."

He turned to his golden singers and raised his hands like a conductor. On cue, they sang in harmony: "Laaaa!"

It was only one chord, but it filled me with bliss. I suddenly couldn't remember where I was or what I was doing. If the golden singers had decided to tear me to pieces at that moment, I wouldn't have resisted, as long as they kept singing. Nothing mattered to me, except the sound.

Then the golden girls went silent. The feeling passed. Their faces returned to beautiful, impassive metal.

"That ..." I swallowed. "That was amazing."

"Amazing?" Apollo wrinkled his nose. "There are only three of them! Their harmonies sound empty. I can't perform without the full quartet."

Grover was weeping with joy. "They're so beautiful. They're perfect!"

I was kind of glad Juniper wasn't within earshot, since she's the jealous type.

Apollo crossed his tan arms. "They're not perfect, Mr. Satyr. I need all four or the concert will be ruined. Unfortunately, my fourth celedon went rogue this morning. I can't find her anywhere."

I looked at the three golden automatons, staring at Apollo, quietly waiting for orders. "Uh ... how does a backup singer go rogue?"

Apollo made another conductor wave, and the singers sighed in three-part harmony. The sound was so mournful my heart sank into my gut. At that moment, I felt sure I'd never be happy again. Then, just as quickly, the feeling dissipated.

"They're out of warranty," the god explained. "Hephaestus made them for me back in the old days, and they worked fine ... until the day after their two-thousand-year warranty expired. Then, naturally, WHAM! The fourth one goes

haywire and runs off to the big city.” He gestured in the general direction of Manhattan. “Of course I tried to complain to Hephaestus, but he’s all, ‘Well, did you have my Protection Plus package?’ And I’m like, ‘I didn’t want your stupid extended warranty!’ And he acts as if it’s my fault the celedon broke, and says if I’d bought the Plus package, I could’ve had a dedicated service hotline, but—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” I interrupted. I really didn’t want to get in the middle of a god-versus-god argument. I’d been there too many times. “So if you know that your celedon is in the city, why can’t you just look for her yourself?”

“I don’t have time! I have to practice. I have to write a set list and do a sound check! Besides, this is what heroes are for.”

“Running the gods’ errands,” I muttered.

“Exactly.” Apollo spread his hands. “I assume the missing celedon is roaming the Theater District, looking for a suitable place to audition. Celedones have the usual starlet dreams—being discovered, headlining a Broadway musical,

that sort of thing. Most of the time I can keep their ambitions under control. I mean I can't have them upstaging me, can I? But I'm sure without me around she thinks she's the next Katy Perry. You two need to get her before she causes any problems. And hurry! The concert is tonight and Manhattan is a large island."

Grover tugged his goatee. "So ... you want us to find her while you do sound checks?"

"Think of it as a favor," Apollo said. "Not just for me, but for all those mortals in Manhattan."

"Oh." Grover's voice got very small. "Oh, no ..."

"What?" I demanded. "What oh, no?"

Years ago, Grover created a magic empathy link between us (another long story) and we could sense each other's emotions. It wasn't exactly mind reading, but I could tell he was terrified.

"Percy," he said, "if that celedon starts singing in public, in the middle of afternoon rush hour —"

"She'll cause no end of havoc," Apollo said.

"She might sing a love song, or a lullaby, or a patriotic war tune, and whatever the mortals hear ..."

I shuddered. One sigh from the golden girls had plunged me into despair, even with Apollo controlling their power. I imagined a rogue celestion busting into song in a crowded city—putting people to sleep, or making them fall in love, or urging them to fight.

"She has to be stopped," I agreed. "But why us?"

"I like you!" Apollo grinned. "You've faced the Sirens before. This isn't too different. Just put some wax in your ears. Besides, your friend Grover here is a satyr. He has natural resistance to magical music. Plus he can play the lyre."

"What lyre?" I asked.

Apollo snapped his fingers. Suddenly Grover was holding the weirdest musical instrument I'd ever seen. The base was a hollowed-out tortoise shell, which made me feel really bad for the tortoise. Two polished wooden arms stuck out one side like a bull's horns, with a bar across the top

and seven strings stretching from the bar to the base of the shell. It looked like a combination harp, banjo, and dead turtle.

"Oh!" Grover almost dropped the lyre. "I couldn't! This is your—"

"Yes," Apollo agreed cheerfully. "That's my own personal lyre. Of course if you damage it, I'll incinerate you, but I'm sure you'll be careful! You can play the lyre, can't you?"

"Um ..." Grover plucked a few notes that sounded like a funeral dirge.

"Keep practicing," Apollo said. "You'll need the lyre's magic to capture the celedon. Have Percy distract her while you play."

"Distract her," I repeated.

This quest was sounding worse and worse. I didn't see how a tortoiseshell harp could defeat a golden automaton, but Apollo clapped me on the shoulder like everything was settled.

"Excellent!" he said. "I'll meet you at the Empire State Building at sunset. Bring me the celedon. One way or another I'll persuade Hephaestus to fix her. Just don't be late! I can't keep my

audience waiting. And remember, not a scratch on that lyre.”

Then the sun god and his golden backup singers disappeared in a cloud of steam.

“Happy birthday to me,” Grover whimpered, and plucked a sour note on the lyre.

We caught the subway to Times Square. We figured that would be a good place to start looking. It was in the middle of the Theater District and full of weird street performers and about a billion tourists, so it was the natural place for a golden diva to get some attention for herself.

Grover hadn't bothered disguising himself. His white T-shirt read: What Would Pan Do? The tips of his horns stuck out from his curly hair. Usually he wore jeans over his shaggy legs and specially fitted shoes over his hooves, but today from the waist down he was au naturel goat.

I doubted it would matter. Most mortals couldn't see through the Mist, which hid the true appearance of monsters. Even without

Grover's normal disguise, people would have to look really closely to notice he was a satyr, and even then they probably wouldn't bat an eye. This was New York, after all.

As we pushed through the crowd, I kept searching for the glint of gold, hoping to spot the rogue celedon, but the square was packed as usual. A guy wearing only his underwear and a guitar was having his picture taken with some tourists. Cops hung out on the street corners, looking bored. At Broadway and West Forty-Ninth, the intersection was blocked and a crew of roadies was setting up some sort of stage. Preachers, ticket scalpers, and hawkers shouted over each other, trying to get attention. Music blasted from dozens of loudspeakers, but I didn't hear any magical singing.

Grover had given me a ball of warm wax to stuff in my ears whenever necessary. He said he always kept some handy, like chewing gum, which didn't make me eager to use it.

He bumped into a pretzel vendor's cart and lurched back, hugging Apollo's lyre protective-

ly.

"You know how to use that thing?" I asked. "I mean, what kind of magic does it do?"

Grover's eyes widened. "You don't know? Apollo built the walls of Troy just by playing this lyre. With the right song, it can create almost anything!"

"Like a cage for the celedon?" I asked.

"Uh ... yeah!"

He didn't sound too confident, and I wasn't sure I wanted him playing Guitar Hero with a godly tortoise banjo. Sure, Grover could do some magic with his reed pipes. On a good day, he could make plants grow and tangle his enemies. On a bad day, he could only remember Justin Bieber songs, which didn't do anything except give me a headache.

I tried to think of a plan. I wished my girlfriend, Annabeth, was here. She was more of the planning type. Unfortunately, she was off in San Francisco visiting her dad.

Grover grabbed my arm. "There."

I followed his gaze. Across the square, at the

outdoor stage, workers scurried around, installing lights on the scaffolding, setting up microphone stands, and plugging in giant speakers. Probably they were prepping for a Broadway musical preview or something.

Then I saw her—a golden lady making her way toward the platform. She climbed over the police barricades that cordoned off the intersection, squeezed between workers who completely ignored her, and headed for the steps, stage right. She glanced at the crowd in Times Square and smiled, as if imagining their wild applause. Then she headed for the center microphone.

“Oh, gods!” Grover yelled. “If that sound system is on ...”

I stuffed wax in my ears as we ran for the stage.

Fighting automatons is bad enough. Fighting one in a crowd of mortals is a recipe for disaster. I didn’t want to worry about the mortals’ safety and mine and figure out how to capture the celedon. I needed a way to evacuate Times

Square without causing a stampede.

As we wove through the crowd, I grabbed the nearest cop by the shoulder.

"Hey!" I told him. "Presidential motorcade coming! You guys better clear the streets!"

I pointed down Seventh Avenue. Of course there was no motorcade, but I did my best to imagine one.

See, some demigods can actually control the Mist. They can make people see what they want them to see. I wasn't very good at it, but it was worth a shot. Presidential visits are common enough, with the United Nations in town and all, so I figured the cop might buy it.

Apparently he did. He glanced toward my imaginary line of limos, made a disgusted face, and said something into his two-way radio. With the wax in my ears, I couldn't hear what, but all the other cops in the square started herding the crowd toward the side streets.

Unfortunately, the celedon had reached center stage.

We were still fifty feet away when she

grabbed the mike and tapped it. BOOM, BOOM, BOOM echoed through the streets.

"Grover," I yelled, "you'd better start playing that lyre."

If he responded, I didn't hear it. I sprinted for the stage. The workers were too busy arguing with the cops to try stopping me. I bounded up the steps, pulled my pen from my pocket, and uncapped it. My sword, Riptide, sprang into existence, though I wasn't sure it would help me. Apollo wouldn't be happy with me if I decapitated his backup singer.

I was twenty feet from the celedon when a lot of things happened at once.

The golden singer belted out a note so powerful I could hear it through the wax plugs. Her voice was heartbreakingly sad, filled with longing. Even muffled through the wax, it made me want to break down and cry—which is what several thousand people around Times Square did. Cars stopped. Police and tourists fell to their knees, weeping, hugging each other in consolation.

Then I became aware of a different sound—Grover, frantically strumming his lyre. I couldn't exactly hear it, but I could feel the tremor of magic rippling through the air, shaking the stage under my feet. Thanks to the empathy link, I caught flashes of Grover's thoughts. He was singing about walls, trying to summon a box around the celedon.

The good news: It sort of worked. A brick wall erupted from the stage between me and the celedon, knocking over the mike stand and interrupting her song. The bad news: By the time I figured out what was going on, I couldn't stop my momentum. I ran straight into the wall, which wasn't mortared, so I promptly collapsed on top of the celedon along with about a thousand bricks.

My eyes watered. My nose felt broken. Before I could regain my bearings, the celedon struggled out of the pile of bricks and pushed me off. She raised her arms in triumph as if the whole thing had been a planned stunt.

She sang, "Ta-daaaaah!"

She was no longer amplified, but her voice carried. The mortals stopped sobbing and rose to their feet, clapping and cheering for the cele-don.

"Grover!" I yelled, not sure if he could hear me. "Play something else!"

I picked up my sword and struggled to my feet. I tackled the golden lady, but it was like tackling a lamppost. She ignored me and launched into song.

As I wrestled her, trying to pull her off balance, the temperature onstage began to rise. The cele-don's lyrics were in Ancient Greek, but I caught a few of the words: Apollo, sunlight, golden fire. It was some kind of ode to the god. Her metal skin grew hot. I smelled something burning and realized it was my shirt.

I stumbled away from her, my clothes smoldering. The wax had melted out of my ears so I could hear her song clearly. All around Times Square, people started dropping from the heat.

Over at the barricades, Grover played wildly on the lyre, but he was too anxious to focus.

Random bricks fell from the sky. One of the monitor speakers on stage morphed into a chicken. A plate of enchiladas appeared at the celedon's feet.

"Not helpful!" I shouted through the pain of the rising heat. "Sing about cages! Or gags!"

The air felt like a blast furnace. If the celedon kept this up, Midtown would burst into flames. I couldn't afford to play nice anymore. As the celedon started her next verse, I lunged at her with my sword.

She lurched away with surprising speed. The tip of my blade missed her face by an inch. I'd managed to stop her singing, and she was not happy about it. She glared at me with outrage, then focused on my blade. Fear flickered across her metallic face. Most magical beings knew enough to respect Celestial bronze, since it could vaporize them on contact.

"Surrender and I won't hurt you," I said. "We just want to take you back to Apollo."

She spread her arms. I was afraid she was going to sing again, but instead the celedon

changed form. Her arms grew into golden feathery wings. Her face elongated, growing a beak. Her body shrank until I was staring at a plump metal bird about the size of a quail. Before I could react, the celedon launched herself in the air and flew straight for the top of the nearest building.

Grover stumbled onto the stage next to me. All across Times Square, the mortals who had collapsed from the heat were starting to recover. The pavement still steamed. Police started shouting orders, making a serious effort now to clear the area. Nobody paid us any attention.

I watched the golden bird spiral up until she disappeared over the highest billboard on the Times Tower. You've probably seen the building in pictures: the tall skinny one that's stacked with glowing advertisements and Jumbotron screens.

To be completely honest, I didn't feel so great. I had hot wax melting out of my ears. I'd been charbroiled medium rare. My face felt like it had just been rammed into a brick wall ... be-

cause it had. I had the coppery taste of blood in my mouth, and I was really starting to hate music. And quails.

I turned to Grover. "Did you know she could morph into a bird?"

"Uh, yeah ... But I kind of forgot."

"Great." I nudged the enchilada plate at my feet. "Could you try to summon something more helpful next time?"

"Sorry," he murmured. "I get hungry when I get nervous. So what do we do now?"

I stared up at the top of the Times Tower. "The golden girl wins round one. Time for round two."

You're probably wondering why I didn't put more wax in my ears. For one thing, I didn't have any. For another thing, wax melting out of my ears hurts. And maybe part of me was thinking: Hey, I'm a demigod. This time I'm prepared. I can face the music, literally.

Grover assured me he had the lyre figured out. No more enchiladas or bricks falling from

the sky. I just had to find the celedon, catch her by surprise, and distract her by ... well, I hadn't figured out that part yet.

We took the elevator to the top floor and found stairs to the roof. I wished I could fly, but that wasn't one of my powers, and my pegasus friend Blackjack hadn't been answering my calls for help lately. (He gets a little distracted in the springtime when he's searching the skies for cute lady pegasi.)

Once we made it to the roof, the celedon was easy to find. She was in human form, standing at the edge of the building with her arms spread, serenading Times Square with her own rendition of "New York, New York."

I really hate that song. I don't know anybody who's actually from New York who doesn't hate that song, but hearing her sing it made me hate it a whole lot more.

Anyway, she had her back to us, so we had an advantage. I was tempted to sneak up behind her and push her off, but she was so strong I hadn't been able to budge her before. Besides,

she'd probably just turn into a bird and ...
Hmm. A bird.

An idea formed in my mind. Yes, I do get ideas sometimes.

"Grover," I said, "can you use the lyre to summon a birdcage? Like a really strong one, made from Celestial bronze?"

He pursed his lips. "I suppose, but birds shouldn't be caged, Percy. They should be free! They should fly and—" He looked at the celedon. "Oh, you mean—"

"Yeah."

"I'll try."

"Good," I said. "Just wait for my cue. Do you still have that blindfold from Pin the Tail on the Human?"

He handed me the strip of cloth. I shrank my sword to ballpoint-pen form and slipped it in the pocket of my jeans. I'd need both hands free for this. I crept up on the celedon, who was now belting out the final chorus.

Even though she was facing the other way, her music filled me with the urge to dance

(which, believe me, you never want to see). I forced myself to keep going, but fighting her magic was like pushing my way through a row of heavy drapes.

My plan was simple: Gag the celedon. She would turn back into a bird and try to escape. I would grab her and shove her into a birdcage. What could go wrong?

On the last line of "New York, New York," I jumped on her back, locking my legs around her waist and yanking the blindfold across her mouth like a horse's bridle.

Her grand finale was cut short with a "New Yor—urff!"

"Grover, now!" I yelled.

The celedon stumbled forward. I had a dizzying view of the chaos below in Times Square—cops trying to clear the crowd, lines of tourists doing impromptu high-kick routines like the Radio City Rockettes. The electronic billboards down the side of the Times Tower looked like a very steep, psychedelic waterslide, with nothing but hard pavement at the bottom.

The celedon staggered backward, flailing and mumbling through the gag.

Grover desperately strummed his lyre. The strings sent powerful magic vibrations through the air, but Grover's voice quivered with uncertainty.

"Um, birds!" he warbled. "La, la, la! Birds in cages! Very strong cages! Birds!"

He wasn't going to win any Grammys with those lyrics, and I was losing my grip. The celedon was strong. I'd ridden a Minotaur before, and the golden lady was at least that hard to hold on to.

The celedon spun around, trying to throw me. She clamped her hands around my forearms and squeezed. Pain shot up to my shoulders.

I yelled, "Grover, hurry!" But with my teeth clenched, the words came out more like, "Grr—huh."

"Birds in cages!" Grover strummed another chord. "La, la, la, cages!"

Amazingly, a birdcage shimmered into being at the edge of the roof. I was too busy getting

tossed around to have a good look, but Grover seemed to have done a good job. The cage was just large enough for a parrot, or a fat quail, and the bars glowed faintly ... Celestial bronze.

Now if I could just get the celedon into bird form. Unfortunately, she wasn't cooperating. She spun hard, breaking my grip and shoving me over the side of the building.

I tried not to panic. Sadly, this wasn't the first time I'd been thrown off a skyscraper.

I'd like to tell you that I did some cool acrobatic move, grabbed the edge of a billboard, and vaulted back up to the roof in a perfect triple flip.

Nope. As I bounced off the first Jumbotron screen, a metal strut somehow snagged my belt and stopped me from falling. It also gave me the ultimate wedgie of all time. Then, as if that wasn't bad enough, my momentum spun me upside down and I peeled right out of my pants.

I plummeted headfirst toward Times Square, grabbing wildly for anything to slow me down. Luckily, the top of the next billboard had a rung

across it, maybe for extremely brave maintenance workers to latch their harnesses onto.

I managed to catch it and flipped right side up. My arms were nearly yanked out of their sockets, but somehow I kept my grip. And that's how I ended up hanging from a billboard over Times Square without my pants.

To answer your next question: boxers. Plain blue boxers. No smiley faces. No hearts.

Laugh all you want. They're more comfortable than briefs.

The celedon smiled at me from the top of the roof, about twenty feet above. Just below her, my jeans hung from the metal strut, blowing in the wind like they were waving me goodbye. I couldn't see Grover. His music had stopped.

My grip weakened. The pavement was maybe seven hundred feet down, which would make for a very long scream as I fell to my death. The glowing screen of the Jumbotron was slowly cooking my stomach.

As I was dangling there, the celedon began a special serenade just for me. She sang about let-

ting go, laying down my troubles, resting by the banks of a river. I don't remember the exact lyrics, but you get the idea.

It was all I could do to hold on. I didn't want to drop, but the celedon's music washed over me, dismantling my resolve. I imagined that I would float down safely. I would land on the banks of a lazy river, where I could have a nice relaxing picnic with my girlfriend.

Annabeth.

I remembered the time I'd saved Annabeth from the Sirens in the Sea of Monsters. I'd held her while she cried and struggled, trying to swim to her death because she thought she would reach some beautiful promised land.

Now I imagined she was holding me back. I could hear what she'd say: *It's a trick, Seaweed Brain! You've got to trick her back or you'll die. And if you die, I'll never forgive you!*

That broke the celedon's spell. Annabeth's anger was way scarier than most monsters, but don't tell her I said that.

I looked up at my jeans, dangling uselessly

above. My sword was in pen form in the pocket, where it did me no good. Grover had started to sing about birds again, but it wasn't helping. Apparently the celedon only turned into bird form when she was startled.

Wait ...

Out of desperation, I formed Stupid Plan Version 2.0.

"Hey!" I called up. "You really are amazing, Miss Celedon! Before I die, can I have your autograph?"

The celedon halted midsong. She looked surprised, then smiled with pleasure.

"Grover!" I called. "Come over here!"

The lyre music stopped. Grover's head poked over the side. "Oh, Percy ... I—I'm sorry—"

"It's okay!" I faked a smile, using our empathy link to tell him how I really felt. I couldn't send complete thoughts, but I tried to get the general point across: He needed to be ready. He needed to be quick. I hoped he was a good catch.

"Do you have a pen and paper?" I asked him. "I want to get this lady's autograph before I die."

Grover blinked. "Uh ... jeez. No. But isn't there a pen in the pocket of your jeans?"

Best. Satyr. Ever. He totally got the plan.

"You're right!" I gazed up at the celedon imploringly. "Please? Last request? Could you just fish the pen out of my jeans and sign them? Then I can die happy."

Golden statues can't blush, but the celedon looked extremely flattered. She reached down, retrieved my jeans, and pulled out the pen.

I caught my breath. I'd never seen Riptide in the hands of a monster before. If this went wrong, if she realized it was a trick, she could kill Grover. Celestial bronze blades work just fine on satyrs.

She examined the pen like she'd never used one before.

"You have to take the cap off," I said helpfully. My fingers were beginning to slip.

She laid the jeans on the ledge, next to the birdcage. She uncapped the pen and Riptide sprang to life.

If I hadn't been about to die, it would've been

the funniest thing I'd ever seen. You know those gag cans of candy with the coiled-up toy snake inside?

It was like watching somebody open one of those, except replace the toy snake with a three-foot-long blade.

The Celestial sword shot to full length and the celedon thrust it away, leaping backward with a not-very-musical shriek. She turned into a bird, but Grover was ready. He dropped Apollo's lyre and caught the fat golden quail in both hands.

Grover stuffed her in the cage and slammed the door shut. The celedon went crazy, squawking and flapping, but she didn't have room to turn back to human form, and in bird form—thank the gods—she didn't seem to have any magic in her voice.

"Good job!" I called up to Grover.

He looked sick. "I think I scratched Apollo's lyre. And I just caged a bird. This is the worst birthday ever."

"By the way," I reminded him, "I'm about to

fall to my death here.”

“Ah!” Grover snatched up the lyre and played a quick tune. Now that he wasn’t in danger and the monster was caged, he seemed to have no problem using the lyre’s magic. Typical. He summoned a rope and threw it down to me. Somehow he managed to pull me to the top, where I collapsed.

Below us, Times Square was still in complete chaos. Tourists wandered around in a daze. The cops were breaking up the last of the high-kick dance routines. A few cars were on fire, and the outdoor stage had been reduced to a pile of kindling, bricks, and broken sound equipment.

Across the Hudson River, the sun was going down. All I wanted to do was lie there on the roof and enjoy the feeling of not being dead. But our job wasn’t done yet.

“We’ve got to get the celedon back to Apollo,” I said.

“Yeah,” Grover agreed. “But, uh ... maybe put your pants on first?”

Apollo was waiting for us in the lobby of the Empire State Building. His three golden singers paced nervously behind him.

When he saw us, he brightened—literally. A glowing aura appeared around his head.

“Excellent!” He took the birdcage. “I’ll get Hephaestus to fix her up, and this time I’m not taking any excuses about expired warranties. My show starts in half an hour!”

“You’re welcome,” I said.

Apollo accepted the lyre from Grover. The god’s expression turned dangerously stormy. “You scratched it.”

Grover whimpered. “Lord Apollo—”

“It was the only way to catch the celedon,” I interceded. “Besides, it’ll buff out. Get Hephaestus to do it. He owes you, right?”

For a second, I thought Apollo might blast us both to ashes, but finally he just grunted. “I suppose you’re right. Well, good job, you two! As your reward, you’re invited to watch me perform on Mount Olympus!”

Grover and I glanced at each other. Insulting

a god was dangerous, but the last thing I wanted to do was hear more music.

"We aren't worthy," I lied. "We'd love to, really, but you know, we'd probably explode or something if we heard your godly music at full volume."

Apollo nodded thoughtfully. "You're right. It might distract from my performance if you exploded. How considerate of you." He grinned. "Well, I'm off, then. Happy birthday, Percy!"

"It's Grover's birthday," I corrected, but Apollo and his singers had already disappeared in a flash of golden light.

"So much for a day off," I said, turning back to Grover.

"Back to Prospect Park?" he suggested. "Juniper must be worried to death."

"Yeah," I agreed. "And I'm really hungry."

Grover nodded enthusiastically. "If we leave now, we can pick up Juniper and reach Camp Half-Blood in time for the sing-along. They have s'mores!"

I winced. "No sing-along, please. But I'll go for

the s'mores."

"Deal!" Grover said.

I clapped him on the shoulder. "Come on, G-man. Your birthday might turn out okay after all."